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AUTHOR Redd, Teresa M.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether the adoption of an Afrocentric textbook at a historically Black university motivated freshman composition students to read, write, and think. Subjects, 911 out of 1,305 students who completed English 002 during the 1991-92 academic year at Howard University, completed surveys regarding the textbook "Revelations: An Anthology of Expository Essays by and about Blacks." Results indicated that: (1) Black writers made 80% of the students feel more positive about writing; (2) 94% of the students said they had enjoyed reading about the issues discussed in the textbook; (3) 64% of the students indicated that they had enjoyed writing about the issues in the textbook; and (4) approximately 89% of the students agreed that reading the textbook had made them think more carefully about the Black Experience. Findings reflect three factors that play an important role in Afrocentric theory: many students were motivated to read the textbook because they could "relate to" essays about the Black Experience; students wanted to read the book because of what they were discovering about Black people; and the Black role models in the textbook proved to be a source of inspiration. However, teachers cannot assume that students will enjoy writing about Afrocentric topics because they are interested in the topics; and not all Black students like an all-Black curriculum. (The table of contents of the textbook and an appendix giving student evaluations are attached. Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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An Afrocentric Curriculum in a Composition Classroom: Motivating Students to Read, Write, and Think

Teresa M. Redd
Howard University
March 31, 1993

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Send correspondence to:
Dr. Teresa M. Redd
11240 Legato Way
Silver Spring, MD 20901
(H) 301-593-6487
(W) 202-806-6730

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INTRODUCTION

To improve the education of African American students, scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante, Asa Hilliard, Wade Nobles, and Ivan Van Sertima have recommended infusing the curriculum with an Afrocentric content. According to Asante, an Afrocentric curriculum portrays Black people "as the subjects rather than the objects of education. . . . it centers African American students inside history, culture, science, and so forth rather than outside these subjects" (171-172). In other words, an Afrocentric course provides textbooks, lessons, and assignments that relate to the Black Experience. It presents Black role models, and it examines aspects of the Black Experience that Eurocentric scholars have distorted or disregarded.

Asante and other Afrocentric theorists claim that such "culturally consistent" education will not only present an accurate picture of the world but also motivate African American students to learn (177-79). With these goals in mind, in August 1991, the English faculty at my historically Black university introduced an Afrocentric textbook into an expository writing course required of all freshmen. The course was Freshman English 002; the textbook, Revelations: An Anthology of Expository Essays by and about Blacks.

Revelations contains 41 expository selections, all written by Blacks. The writers represent a variety of professions--playwright,

minister, historian, novelist, philosopher, journalist, anthropologist, physician, poet, linguist, psychologist. Topics range from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement, from racist stereotypes to racial pride, from African culture to Black culture outside Africa. (See page 1 of your handout.)

We adopted Revelations as a required text because--at that time--traditional anthologies did not feature enough essays by and about Blacks. For instance, Blacks wrote less than 5% of the essays in The Harper & Row Reader, The Little Brown Reader, and the anthology we had been using, The Norton Reader. True, there were more Black writers listed in multicultural anthologies, but only a few of the "Black" selections were examples of exposition, the type of writing required in Freshman English 002.

Because Revelations contains so many essays by Blacks, we hoped that it would show our students that they were part of a rhetorical and intellectual tradition. We expected the diverse group of writers to demonstrate that Blacks of many backgrounds had made writing an effective tool. Most of all, we wanted the writers to serve as role models for Black students who had wondered whether their experiences were worth writing about or doubted whether the techniques of writing were worth mastering.

At the same time, we hoped that reading about Afrocentric topics would motivate students to write about those topics. In addition, we believed that writing about the topics would allow students to tap their personal experience as well as ideas from the essays. Having such rich resources for writing could give our students a greater sense of authority, a feeling that appears to be a prerequisite for

effective writing (Freedman 345; Shaughnessy 85).

Because our university was a historically Black institution, we also hoped that our students would use reading and writing to learn and think about the past, present, and future of Black people. An Afrocentric reader in a composition course seemed to be an ideal vehicle for achieving this goal, as the preface to Revelations explains: "It gives Black students a chance to use writing to 'think through' issues of importance to themselves and their communities. It makes writing a process of revelation, an act of liberation" (xvi).

THE SURVEY

Has Revelations fulfilled our hopes? At this stage in our research, we do not know whether our students are *writing* better because of Revelations. However, we have conducted a survey to determine whether it *motivates* our students to read, write and think. To assess the impact on motivation, I surveyed the 1,305 students who completed Freshman English 002 during the 1991-1992 academic year. Of those students, 911 filled out the questionnaire. (See page 2 of your handout for a summary of the students' responses.) Their responses reveal both the limits and potential of an Afrocentric reader to stimulate reading, writing, and thinking in a composition classroom. Let us consider four key questions the survey was designed to answer:

1. Did reading so many essays by Black writers make students feel more positive about writing?

In general, yes. The questionnaires indicate that the Black writers made 80% of the students feel more positive about writing. "Reading so many essays by Black writers made me feel more positive

about writing, because these writers are positive role models (in writing + in character)," Student 719 explained.

Surprisingly, some students did not know there were so many Black role models for Black student writers. "This book was extremely beneficial to me, because I really didn't know so many well accomplished Black writers existed," Student 383 admitted. In addition, Student 891 did not know "that black writers are a powerful force as they address tough issues that affect the black community today." One of the most important revelations came from Student 450, who declared, "It . . . made me know that bad writin is not a black thing."

However, everyone did not share these students' views. For instance, Student 47 cautioned, "I think we could have also explored some white authors as well. It's important that we don't tip the scale too far and start to believe that only Blacks can write well, and only Blacks have a culture worth learning about." On the other hand, Student 417 thought that some of the writers in Revelations were poor role models. "Black authors should try as much as possible . . . to be less racists," the student wrote.

2. Did the Afrocentric topics motivate students to read?

Yes, indeed. On the questionnaires 94% of the students indicated that they had enjoyed reading about the issues discussed in Revelations. Teachers were surprised to find that students were reading unassigned essays as well as the assigned ones. The motivation to read was so strong that some students complained as Student 155 did, "I think we should have read more essays in Revelations. I had read a lot more of them on my own."

The students' enthusiasm impressed many teachers who had taught

in the department when the Norton Reader was the required anthology. "Our class enjoyed this text more than any class enjoyed previous texts in past years," Teacher C observed. Teacher D wrote, "My students were much more responsive to this anthology than previous students had been to The Norton Anthology." Likewise, Teacher E recalled, "My discussions on essays in Norton last semester were lethargic to say the least. This semester my students not only do the reading; they talk about it freely."

What motivated students to read Revelations? As Teacher F observed, Revelations was "most effective in bringing the patterns of exposition to life by engaging the students in issues they care about deeply." Roughly 89% of the students agreed that the essays explored issues that were important to them, and this result was correlated with reading enjoyment (r = .52). Thus, Student 912 applauded the book for "combining a lot of issues that we, as young Black Americans, need to review and evaluate."

A thirst for knowledge about their heritage also motivated the students to read. Nearly 70% of the students reported that the essays had shattered some of their misconceptions about Blacks and filled in gaps in their knowledge. One student (No. 196) put it this way: "You have undoubtedly 'saved' many of us by exposing us to the thoughts of influential Blacks. I have left this English course enlighthtened + with greater self-esteem."

3. Did the Afrocentric topics inspire students to write?

Unfortunately, the students were not as eager to write about the topics in Revelations as they were to read about them. In response to the statement "I have enjoyed writing about these

issues," a substantial number (26%) marked "Undecided," partly because some had written about other topics of their choice or other topics assigned by the teacher.

However, the majority (64%) of the students indicated that they had enjoyed writing about the issues in Revelations. Statistically, their writing enjoyment was tied to having something worthwhile to say about the issues (r = .58). Roughly 75% of the students indicated that they had something worthwhile to write about the issues, while only 6% said they did not.

The issues in Revelations particularly inspired Students 213 and 886. Student 213 wrote, "I was given such an insight into the lives, minds, and thinkings of established Blacks as a result of my exposure to Revelations. Oftentimes I was inspired to create, to write as a result of having read an essay." At the same time, the book changed Student 886's attitude toward writing in general. "These essays have made me more aware of the things I write about," the student observed. "I find myself wanting to write about issues with substance--issues that will make people think, like these essays do."

However, one student (No. 201) did not feel that the class was writing about "issues with substance." The student lamented, "I felt horrid because I was not writing or talking about the problems or evils of America. I felt like I was neglecting the plight of my race."

Even students who were interested in the topics in Revelations found that interesting topics did not necessarily change their attitude toward writing. For instance, Student 568 commented, "The Book is filled with very interesting essays, Although I am undecided on whether it has inspired me to write more. The reason for this I

feel is because I don't really like writing on the whole." Nor did the topics always take the fear out of writing. Student 549 confessed, "I have such an aprehension of writing about the issues because my grades in writing have not been "up to par" lately."

4. Did reading and writing about Afrocentric topics make students think more carefully about those topics?

Approximately 89% of the students agreed that reading the book had made them think more carefully about the Black Experience. For example, Student 218 remarked, "Not only have I used these carefully thought out essays as blueprints for my essays, but it has also helped my thought process. I have always had strong feelings about the situation blacks are in, but reading this book has helped me to clarify my thoughts and put them into words."

Writing as well as reading enabled students to "think through" the issues. For instance, Student 890 remarked, "I really understood the essays when I wrote about some." Indeed, 79% of the students agreed that writing about the issues made them think more carefully about those issues; only 6% disagreed.

Student 719 was among the undecided. This student wrote, "I am . . . unsure about whether I thought more about my heritage by reading + writing about these issues--I always think about my heritage!"

CONCLUSION

The survey results reflect three factors that play an important role in Afrocentric theory. First, as Afrocentric theory suggests, many students were motivated to read Revelations because they could "relate to" essays about the Black Experience. Indeed, some students

equated "interesting" with "something I can relate to." Second, students also wanted to read the book because of what they were discovering about Black people. Indeed, it was surprising to find that many Black college students knew so little about the historical achievements of Black people.

Finally, as Afrocentric scholars have predicted, the Black role models in Revelations proved to be a source of inspiration. Seeing so many works by Black writers made some students realize that "bad writin is not a black thing." This realization is fundamental to Black students' writing achievement. Far too many Blacks grow up believing stereotypes depicting intellectual achievement as "a white thing" or an "Asian thing." As a result, psychologists Claude Steele (72-74) and Jeff Howard (512) tell us, many Blacks avoid intellectual challenges; they are afraid to take risks lest they confirm the stereotypes. These stereotypes are especially harmful in a writing class, for writing is a risk-taking activity that literally puts a writer's ego "on the line." Revelations could counter such stereotypes because it presented 41 skilled Black writers--not simply "token" Blacks scattered throughout an anthology.

Nevertheless, as a result of the survey, I would like to make two observations that limit what we might expect from an Afrocentric curriculum:

1. We cannot assume that students will enjoy writing about Afrocentric topics because they are interested in the topics.

Some students do not want to write, regardless of whether they are reading and writing about topics that interest them. Interest in the topics in Revelations could not overcome a fear of or distaste for

writing. However, the students' interest in reading Revelations has implications for writing instruction, for reading essays is an important step in learning the conventions and strategies of essay writing (Crowhurst 330-333).

2. We cannot assume that all Black students like an all-Black curriculum.

A number of students objected to the Afrocentric focus of Revelations. For instance, Student 478 insisted that only "students that are exceedingly black conscious" could relate to such a book. This student and others argued that a book by and about Blacks was too narrow in scope. "This is an excellent book for Freshman English," Student 70 observed, "but I feel that we should also be enlightened on great works from other ethnic groups." Such objections were voiced, even though most of our students had taken high school classes where the selected authors were almost exclusively white.

Our faculty will continue to mull over these and other student responses, for we have much more to learn about the impact of Revelations. We need studies that compare Revelations to a Eurocentric or multicultural anthology. We also need experiments that isolate the influence of the anthologies on the quality of our students' writing. So far, however, the feedback from our classes has been encouraging.

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APPENDIX 1: Table of Contents of Revelations

ILLUSTRATION
Ossie Davis, "The English Language Is My Enemy"
Jewell Parker Rhodes, "The Double Whammy"
Ishmael Reed, "America: The Multicultural Society"
Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born"
Geneva Smitherman, "The Rhetorical Qualities of the Black Rap"
W.E.B. DuBois, "Of the Sorrow Songs"
COMPARISON-CONTRAST
Toni Morrison, "A Slow Walk of Trees"
Patrice Gaines-Carter, "Is My 'Post-Integration' Daughter Black Enough?"
Ivan Van Sertima, "They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America"
David Bradley, "My Hero, Malcolm X"
Jay Ford, "20/20 Hindsight"
Lerone Bennett, Jr. "The 10 Biggest Myths about the Black Family"
Steve Biko, "Some African Cultural Concepts"
CLASSIFICATION
Mary Mebane, "Shades of Black"
Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors"
Karen Webb, "Black English: A Discussion"
Benjamin Quarles, "Black History's Diversified Clientele"
Johnetta Cole, "Culture: Negro, Black and Nigger"
John Hope Franklin, "Slavery and Brutality"
PROCESS ANALYSIS
Haki Madhubuti, "Hard Words and Clear Songs: The Writing of Black Poetry"
Camara Laye, "The Mysteries of My Father's Workshop"
Malcolm X, "My First Conk"
Frederick Douglass, "Learning to Read and Write"
Bernice Reagon, "Black Music in Our Hands"
Jomo Kenyatta, "Gikuyu Industries: Hut-Building"
CAUSE-EFFECT
Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks"
Brent Staples, "Black Men and Public Space"
Meta Carstarphen, "Black vs. Blue: Time for a Cease-Fire?"
Shelby Steele, "The Recoloring of Campus Life"
Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?"
Jeff Howard and Ray Hammond, "Rumors of Inferiority"
Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts"
Juan Williams, "Eyes on the Prize"
DEFINITION
William Raspberry, "The Handicap of Definition"
Gloria Naylor, "Mommy, What Does 'Nigger' Mean?"
Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence"
James Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?"
Amiri Baraka, "'Black Is a Country"
Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement"
Zora Neale Hurston, "What It Feels Like to Be Colored Me"
Franklyn Jenifer, "Afrocentricity Is No Cause for Alarm"

008-002 STUDENT EVALUATION OF REVELATIONS 1991-1992 AY

N = 911

(70% of 1,305 eligible respondents)

		Percentages (rounded)				
1.	The essays are fairly easy to understand.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(1 missing)	39	56	2	3	0
2.	The essays are useful models for writing: They showed me how writers use expository strategies like comparison-contrast and classification.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(6 missing)	34	49	11	6	1
3.	Reading so many essays by Black writers has made me feel more positive about writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(5 missing)	45	34	14	6	1
4.	The essays explore issues that are important to me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(3 missing)	45	44	8	3	0
5.	The essays have encouraged me to participate in class discussions.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(233 missing/not on Spring 92 form)	29	45	16	10	1
6.	I have enjoyed <u>reading</u> about the issues discussed in the book.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(5 missing)	50	43	4	2	0
7.	I have enjoyed <u>writing</u> about these issues.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(28 missing)	15	49	26	8	2
8.	When I write about these issues, I feel that I have something worthwhile to say.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(19 missing)	26	48	20	5	1
9.	The essays shattered some misconceptions that I had about Blacks and filled in some gaps in my knowledge.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(11 missing)	27	42	14	14	3
10.	<u>Reading</u> the essays has made me think more carefully about the heritage and experience of Black people.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(8 missing)	50	40	6	4	1
11.	<u>Writing</u> about the issues discussed in this book has made me think more carefully about those issues.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(22 missing)	29	50	15	5	1
12.	Overall, I am glad that we read <u>Revelations</u> in Freshman English 002.	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(3 missing)	60	33	5	2	1